

The University of Chicago

CONTEMPORARY TASTE IN THE
STAGE DECORATIONS OF
LONDON THEATERS
1770-1800

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AND LITERATURE

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RUSSELL THOMAS

I CAN find no evidence that scene-painting was regarded seriously in England by the critics of art at any time during the eighteenth century. There were no theories of *mise en scène*. There were no historical records preserved of the achievements of Inigo Jones or of the productions of Lambert, Streeter, De Voto, Servandoni, and other artists of repute who painted for London's several theaters during the early years of the century. The memory of Servandoni's spectacles was still fresh in 1770; and some of his scenes were occasionally taken after that date from the Covent Garden storehouse to decorate new pantomimes. But beyond an occasional sentimental allusion to some of these artists, there is nothing to tell us of their work or their theories of stage decoration. One looks in vain to Reynolds, the friend of Garrick and an interested spectator at the theater, for some account of scenic art as a reflection of taste. We find him speaking of contemporary acting rather than of stage *décor*.¹ Gainsborough once took occasion to write an expression of dis-

approval to Garrick of the excessive use of red, blue, and yellow in his decorations.² He was greatly interested in De Louthembourg's Eidophusikon, but otherwise his correspondence showed no more than a casual interest in stage decoration. Horace Walpole, prolific in his notes on painters and painting and frequent commentator upon the stage, wholly ignores scene-painting as an art.³

This general absence of serious critical regard for stage *décor* is not surprising. Theatrical managers during the first three quarters of the eighteenth century were not noted for the attention which they gave to the *mise en scène*. Most of the money spent on decoration went into the production of pantomimes and other spectacles. If one is to form any conception of the taste in stage decoration, he must give his attention chiefly to the accounts of these spectacles. Whatever there was of a serious effort on the part of

² W. B. Boulton, *Thomas Gainsborough* (Chicago, 1907), pp. 128-29.

³ Walpole was generally contemptuous of spectacle. A comment in a letter to the Earl of Strafford, November 11, 1774, is characteristic: "Garrick is treating the town as it deserves and likes to be treated, with scenes, fireworks, and his own writing" (*Letters*, ed. Toynbee [Oxford, 1904], IX, 87).

¹ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Literary works*, ed. Beechy (London, 1858), Seventh Discourse, I, 418, and Thirteenth Discourse, II, 72-73.

all departments of the theater to achieve a unified and more appropriate *mise en scène* sprang principally from experiments in the staging of spectacles and spread to other more serious productions during the latter years of the century.

Before the appearance of Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg in London in 1773, scant attention appears to have been given to co-ordinating the efforts of author, composer, scene-painter, machinist, and musician, even in the production of spectacles. Nor was this irregularity confined to English theaters alone. A lack of harmony in uniting the forces of the stage apparently prevailed in France, at least as late as 1760, when Jean Georges Noverre published his essays on the ballet. Noverre was one of the few artists of the theater to record his theories of *décor* in the eighteenth century; and his ideas, in view of his later associations with the English stage, have a particular interest. In one essay he writes:

How can it be expected that, so complicated a spectacle as that of the opera, will succeed if the chiefs of the various departments that constitute its very being, act without communicating their thoughts and intentions to each other?

The poet asserts his pretended superiority over the musician; the latter would think it derogatory to his dignity to consult the Ballet-master. The former will not stoop to enter into an explanation with the scene-painter who in his turn communicates only with his inferiors: while the machinist whom he despises, rules despot-like over the journeymen of the opera. Were the poet to set the example, things would soon alter for the better, but full of his self importance, and looking down with contempt on the other arts, his knowledge of them can be but superficial; he is ignorant of the effects which each of them can produce, and of those that may result from their union. On the other hand, the musician takes the poem, runs it over without the least attention, and

giving full career to his imagination, sits down to write the music, which has no real meaning, because he did not understand the sense of the work, which he has seen, not perused. . . .

The scene painter, for want of being perfectly acquainted with the subjects of the drama, falls into the greatest error; never consulting with the author, he follows his own ideas; these often militate against the rules of probability which will have everything so disposed as to represent the scene of action. How can he be successful when he does not know the spot where it lies? Yet from such knowledge, and that of the subject, and from these alone, he should form his ideas, otherwise everything will be entirely out of character.

Every nation differs in its laws, manners, customs, modes, and ceremonies: all have not the same taste, the same architecture, nor the same method of cultivating the other arts. The business of the skillful painter is, therefore, to copy that variety. The pencil must be be faithful, and, if it is not adapted to the different countries, it swerves from truth and cannot be expected to please.

The person whose province it is to devise the dresses consults with no one; he often supplies the mode of dressing an ancient nation by one in the present fashion; and this only to please the whim of a female singer or dancer of some reputation.

Meanwhile the Ballet-master is acquainted with no particulars. A score is put in his hands, and upon that music he composes his dances, settles the steps and the dances, and gives it any name whatever.

The business of the machinist is to place the painters' work in its proper light, according to the rules of perspective. His first care is to arrange the different parts of the decoration, in so nice an order, that they form together a complete ensemble. And his talent consists in being quick to bring forward and draw back the scenes. Now if he is not sufficiently intelligent to distribute the shades in proper order, the painters' work must lose its merit, and the effect of the decoration be destroyed. Such parts of the scenery which ought to be exposed in a strong light, look dark and black; whilst those which should be shaded

and darkened are in full sight. It is not the great quantity of lamps, placed together as chance directs or even symmetry requires, that gives light to the stage and sets off the scenery. The talent consists in dividing those lights into unequal masses or parts in order to strengthen those places that want a great light, soften those that should have but little, and overlook those that require still less.

As the painter in order to preserve the rules of perspective, is obliged to introduce in his painting shades and lights gradually increasing and decreasing, the man whose business it is to shew them in the proper light, should, methinks, consult with the artist, that the same proportions may be preserved in the distribution of lights. Nothing can be more disagreeable to the eye than a whole scenery in one and the same colour: neither distance nor perspective can be observed. By the same rule, if the paintings, divided into parts, are placed in lights equally forcible, there will exist no distribution, no manner of proportion, and the whole scene will produce no sort of effect. . . . Let the poets come down from their sacred mount: let each artist in his department at the opera, act in concert, and give each other mutual assistance: Then the entertainment is sure to please, will never fail of success.⁴

This is a criticism of the policies of the French theaters, which reputedly surpassed the London theaters in the splendor of their stage effects. Whether Noverre's statement was exaggerated or not, there can be no doubt whatsoever that it would have been a fair charge against the policies of the English theaters at any time prior to 1773.

There is, however, considerable evidence in the press and elsewhere, after

⁴ *The works of Monsieur Noverre*, translated from the French (London, 1783), I, 135 ff. Noverre was one of the notable ballet masters of the Continent after the middle of the century. Garrick brought Noverre and his troupe to London in 1753, but the appearance caused the famous Drury Lane riot of that year. In 1781 Noverre came to London as ballet master of the Opera House. He remained there for several seasons.

the arrival of De Louthembourg, of an increasing sensitiveness to the possibilities of a better co-ordinated *mise en scène*. One of De Louthembourg's stipulations upon taking the post of designer-in-chief at Drury Lane was that he should be privileged to co-ordinate the efforts of the scene-painters with the costumers, the musicians, and the ballet master and to supervise the machinery of the theater.⁵ When he stated these terms, De Louthembourg was thinking of the production of spectacles; but the comments in the periodicals show that occasionally he extended his practice to legitimate drama as well. All accounts show that De Louthembourg was a designer rather than a scene-painter. From his designs the staff of scene-painters prepared the scenes which the artist carefully supervised. He was also the principal machinist of the theater, which post gave him supervision of the lighting and the methods of disposing of all scenes upon the stage.

After De Louthembourg's retirement from Drury Lane in 1781 or 1782 there does not appear to have been a consistent policy even in the staging of spectacles. While the theaters continued to employ the mechanical effects which he devised for lighting and for disposing and removing of settings, the manager of neither major playhouse seems to have invested full authority for the direction of the *mise en scène* in the hands of one artist.⁶ The names of several scene-painters appeared in the playbills and they shared equally

⁵ These terms are stated in two letters by De Louthembourg addressed to Garrick. The texts of these letters, which have not been published, are included in my unpublished doctoral dissertation "Spectacle in the theatres of London, 1767-1802" (University of Chicago, 1942).

⁶ John Inigo Richards was chief of the scenic staff at Covent Garden during most of De Louthembourg's regime at Drury Lane, but there is no evidence that he exercised complete authority there. Thomas Greenwood was the chief scene-painter at Drury Lane from 1781 to 1794.

in the news accounts.⁷ Authors frequently stated their gratitude to particular scene-painters and machinists for their co-operation in making the plays successful; but there is no evidence of the concerted direction of all forces until near the end of the century, when Kemble placed the supervision of several of his productions at Drury Lane in the hands of William Capon. The frequent criticism of improprieties and irregularities in the staging of productions is proof that the stage was slow to respond to the theories of Noverre and De Louthembourg.

Even though the *mise en scène* was not so well co-ordinated as it might have been, there was, however, a general improvement in the quality and appropriateness of scenic effects and the efficiency of the machinery with which the super-spectacles were operated.⁸ The new thea-

⁷ The following extracts from the bills of a few plays are characteristic of the custom of acknowledging the work of the artists:

The siege of Gibraltar (C.G., April 26, 1780): "The new scenes by Mr. Richards and Mr. Carver with a view of the English and Spanish fleets entering the Bay."

The carnival of Venice (D.L., January 28, 1782): "... to conclude with a view of St. Mark's Palace and a Grand Representation of the Carnival Masquerade. The scenery designed by Mr. De Louthembourg and executed under his direction."

Macbeth (D.L., April 21, 1794): "The scenery, machinery, and habits are entirely new. Painters Messrs. Greenwood, Malton, Catton, Capon, Bugarlo, French, Edwards and their assistants. Machinist Mr. Carbonel. The dresses and decorations are executed by Mr. Johnston."

Alexander the Great or the conquest of Persia (D.L., February 12, 1795): "The scenery designed and executed by Mr. Marinari and his assistants. The machinery designed by Mr. Cabanel and executed by him and Mr. Jacobs."

The first edition of John Philip Kemble's *Lodoiska* (London, 1794) contained the following notice: "Act I. The *Scene* is painted by Mr. GREENWOOD, and his assistants. Act II. The *Scene* is painted by Mr. MALTON, and Messrs. LUPINO and DEMARIA, his Assistants. Act III. The *Scenes* are painted by Mr. GREENWOOD; and the *Machinery* is invented by Mr. CABANEL. The *Dresses* and *Decorations* are designed and executed by Mr. JOHNSTONE, and Miss REIN." See also the Preface to Andrew Franklin's operatic spectacle *The Egyptian festival*.

⁸ Newspaper criticism frequently recognized both the general improvement and the propriety of scenery,

ters of the last decade of the century, built on a grander scale, gave more scope to the artist and the machinist; and the taste of the time demanded more attention to *décor*. Tate Wilkinson's remark in 1790 that "we have new scenery to almost every piece" was made while contrasting present practice with that of an earlier generation.⁹

Increase of attention to the scenic and mechanical departments of the theaters is not in itself, however, an index to the character of the prevailing taste. In spite of the lack of any formal statements of a theory of *mise en scène*, the character of the taste is evident to anyone who reads the records of the productions. Unmistakably that taste was for a *décor* that was both literal and romantic. Literalism expressed itself in a demand that the appearance of trees and rocks on the stage resemble exactly that of trees and rocks in nature and that a representation of Charing Cross or Westminster Hall on the stage copy accurately the original from which it was taken. The romantic element of current taste expressed itself in a variety of types of settings. There was, first of all, a taste for the picturesque and the sublime, idealized representations

as well as the increasing lavishness of decoration. The following are typical accounts:

The Count of Narbonne (trans. Robert Jephson; C.G., 1781); *Morning herald* (November 18, 1781): "The scenery, which was in the Gothic Style, was exceedingly well executed. . . ."

The choice of Harlequin (pantomime; C.G., 1781); *Morning chronicle* (January 7, 1782) "... it would be a proof of the great depravity of public taste, if one of the richest exhibitions of beautiful scenery ever shown in a theatre, terminating with so correct and splendid a picture of Eastern manners, failed to produce the most applausive effect."

Alexander the Great (ballet-pantomime; D.L., 1795); *Morning chronicle* (February 13, 1795): "At no time could the British Theatre boast of a spectacle so magnificent. . . ." *Oracle* (February 13, 1795): "The marshalling on a first night of four hundred people, the disciplining of horse, the moving of such ponderous machinery—all constitute a difficulty that it is wonderful to find overcome."

⁹ *Memoirs of his own life* (York, 1790), IV, 91.

of nature which the stage was pre-eminently fitted to produce. There was also a taste for a representation of the remote parts of the earth: the Orient, the Americas, and distant islands, accounts of which excited popular fancy. Finally, there was a taste for the representation of ancient buildings, particularly Gothic edifices—a taste which was accompanied by an interest in antiquarianism in stage *décor* for perhaps the first time in English theatrical history. In general, the taste in stage *décor* was simply a consistent and logical expression of the early stages of romanticism.¹⁰

The development of a realistic stage setting which gave the effect of complete illusion required the solution of several technical problems. One of these was the improvement of perspective in scenes. In a system of stage setting which consisted principally of a back scene, or flat, and three or more pairs of side scenes, or wings, with borders to represent the sky or ceiling, it was difficult to create an effective illusion of perspective and to make all the pieces blend to form the im-

pression of a unit. Even under the best of conditions a simple interior setting would produce a correct perspective only if seen from one point of view, usually the exact center of the auditory. Unless each separate wing and flat were painted with due regard to the distances separating them and the particular angle of disposition, the results would be ineffective. The public theaters of London had never known any settings which rivaled the architectural sets devised by the Bibienas and Juvara for Continental theaters. London's scenic artists seem not to have been too successful in achieving skill in perspective before the last quarter of the century. A treatise on perspective drawing by Thomas Malton, in 1775, took the scene-painters to task for their failure to master the science. In a section of his treatise devoted to perspective in scene-painting, Malton says:

That the perspective representation of the inside of a fine building is more difficult to manage than the exterior is certain, and is manifested in theatrical performances; which, being represented on several detached planes, it is impossible by the rules of art, to make them correspond in every point of view; but they are rarely connected in any one point of view. There are, undoubtedly, many fine performances of the kind; yet without attempting to disparage their authors, I am confident, that, were they better acquainted with perspective, they would produce better and more natural representations; even that famed scene in *Cymon* is a jumble of inconsistencies, both in point of design and execution; although, it was a bold attempt out of the common mode of representations. Few artists have made perspective so much their study, to know how to proportion one part to another, on detached scenes, so as to make the whole unite in the proper point of view, whether the representation be internal or external; indeed from the present construction of the theatres, it is hardly possible to be done; nor are the rules of perspective sufficient for the purpose, without a tolerable knowledge of

¹⁰ The character of taste in stage decoration has been treated briefly by some historians of the period. Professor Dougald MacMillan, in commenting on the methods of production employed during part of this period, says: "I suspect that it would be found that the conventional sets of the middle of the century, serving either as a mere background or displaying ingenuity of contrivance (as in the pantomimes), give way gradually to the pictorial, romantic landscape of De Louthembourg, into which the living actors are fitted within the frame of the proscenium" (*Drury Lane calendar, 1747-1776* [Oxford, 1938], Introd., p. xxix n.). Professor Nicoll says of the new tendency in scenic art during the last half of the century that it is "both romantic and realistic, striking well away from the conventional neo-classicism of former years." Of the realistic aspect of the movement, he says that it assumes two forms, "the one leading towards the attempt to secure complete illusion in the theatre, the other drawing the manager and the painter towards antiquarian efforts" (see *A history of late eighteenth century drama* [Cambridge, 1927], p. 29). By 1770 the taste for a realistic-romantic type of setting was well defined and was the dominant note in stage decorations throughout the remainder of the century. A genuine antiquarian interest did not appear noticeably until late in the period, however.

lines, geometrically. It is the least qualification of a scene painter to be excellent in landscape, in which a small knowledge of perspective is requisite; but in order to execute designs in architecture with correctness, and a just proportion of the several parts, requires a thorough knowledge of perspective. It is somewhat surprising, that all who are concerned or in any way engaged in scene-painting, do not make perspective their immediate study; being the basis, the very soul and existence of their profession; yet to my certain knowledge, several artists employed in it, are not only totally ignorant of it, in theory, but they are almost wholly unacquainted with its rules, which, to me, is unaccountable.¹¹

As long as decorations remained primarily a background of action, not much attention needed to be given to such details. As the action withdrew more and more into the frame of the proscenium and the settings assumed greater importance to the action, it was natural that the audience should show greater regard for the correctness of the illusion. The notion of the stage as a picture in which the actors were the moving figures was voiced by Noverre. "Any decoration whatever," he declared, "is a picture ready to receive a number of figures. The performers and dancers are the personages to adorn and embellish it. But in order that the picture may please and gratify the sight, every compounding part must appear in just and exact proportions."¹² The audiences were quick to recognize that the application of the principle produced more natural or realistic performances. Whatever destroyed the illusion of naturalness in

the stage picture was henceforth open to criticism, and whatever increased the effectiveness of the picture was worthy of praise. It is significant that the first attempts at Drury Lane and Covent Garden to abandon the proscenium doors were made during this period.¹³

Nothing in De Louthembourg's achievements excited more comment than his management of perspective and his success in creating the illusion of great distances. O'Keeffe says he was the first artist to "break the scene into several pieces, by the laws of perspective, showing miles and miles of distance."¹⁴ The reviews of his spectacles rarely failed to observe his success in handling perspective. It must be conceded that most of his settings were landscapes rather than architecture. By the use of a great many ground-rows, cut-cloths, and drop curtains, which were painted to fit together, he succeeded in achieving effects entirely new to the theater audiences of his day. The remarkable perspective of the Naval Review at Portsmouth, his first London spectacle, was one of the features which astonished the audience. In this production every ship was constructed "distinct from the back scene," and the effect in point of perspective was such that one could "scarcely give human invention credit for the execution."¹⁵ Of a setting for Mrs. Cowley's comedy, *The runaway*, a reviewer wrote:

The piece was decorated by an excellent garden scene, painted by that great master De Louthembourg, who has the honour of being

¹¹ Thomas Malton, *A compleat treatise on perspective in theory and practice on the principles of Dr. Brook Taylor* (London, 1775), Book III, sec. 10, pp. 217 ff.

¹² I, 89. In the long passage from Noverre's work which I have previously cited, the author makes very clear his notion that the chief end of the stage picture is a literal fidelity to nature. Observe that he remarks upon the importance of correct perspective in achieving this end.

¹³ Between the years 1780 and 1783 both Drury Lane and Covent Garden experimented with a proscenium which omitted stage doors (see the *Morning chronicle*, September 18, 1780, September 17, 1782; the *Morning herald*, September 19, 1783).

¹⁴ *Recollections of the life of John O'Keeffe* (London, 1826), II, 114.

¹⁵ *Lloyd's evening post*, October 8-11, 1773, and *London chronicle*, October 9-12, 1773. The spectacle was first produced as a finale to a revival of Thomson's masque, *Alfred*, on October 9, 1773.

the first artist who showed our theatre directors that by a just disposition of light and shade, and a critical preservation of perspective, the eye of a spectator might be so effectually deceived in a playhouse, as to be induced to take the produce of art for pure nature.¹⁶

The success of the more colossal spectacles of the last decade in which puppet troops and processions filled the stage was to a large extent dependent upon the mastery of perspective. Noverre describes a device by which he adapted his dancers to the background by grading them according to their height. After describing a ballet setting by Servandoni in which a company of hunters crossed a bridge which was much too small for the men and which therefore destroyed the illusion, he gives an account of his efforts to remedy the difficulty in one of his own productions:

The scene was a forest whose roads were in a line parallel with the spectator. The prospect terminated with a bridge, and behind it a landscape at a considerable distance. I divided this entree into six distinct classes, each of these composed of three couples, in all, thirty six figures. The highest in stature traversed the walk nearest to the spectators. The next were those seen crossing the following road. The third was filled with the third class, and so on until the last or sixth class, ended the race, by going over the bridge. The degrees of proportion were so strictly observed, as to deceive the eye; and that which was the result only of art and good management seemed perfectly in nature. Nay the deception was such that the spectators thought the lessening of the objects proceeded from their distance, and imagined that the very same couples went through the different roads. The music was perfectly adapted to the subject, and fell off gradually as the hunters advanced into the forest, which was extensive, and painted with exquisite taste. Such is, my dear sir, the illusion which stage effect will pro-

duce when it is consonant in every part, and when the artist takes nature for his model.¹⁷

Some such adaptation of the figures in a procession to the background must have been employed in the procession in *Bluebeard* at Drury Lane in 1798.¹⁸

Though the efforts at improving perspective were undertaken as part of the effort to produce a perfect illusion of reality, they left room for considerable criticism. James Boaden, who was as familiar with the workings of the stage as anyone in his time, commented on the inadequacies and voiced a theory of *décor* which was distinctly counter to the prevailing tendency of his generation. Speaking particularly of the settings for tragedy and comedy, he wrote:

But neither tragedy nor comedy ever seemed with me to derive a benefit proportioned to the pains that have been taken in the scenic department of our stages. When the scenes are first drawn on, or the roller descends, the work exhibited is considered a few moments as a work of art—the persons who move before it then engross the attention,—at their exit it is raised or drawn off, and is speedily forgotten, or seen with indifference the second time. If the perspective, as to the actor standing in front of the scene, was so accurate that the whole effect should be delusive, and the impression be of actual sky, and land, and building, (though an objection will always remain to the abrupt junction of the borders with the tops of the scenes—the wings, and the scoring lines where the flats meet each other,—the grooves in which they move, the boarded stage and other difficulties hitherto insurmountable,) I could understand the object of those who spend so much money on their elaboration—but I confess I am of the opinion, that they should never do more than suggest to the imagination; and that it would not be desirable that the spectator should lose his senses to the point of forgetting that he is in a regular theatre, and

¹⁷ I, 97-98.

¹⁸ *Morning chronicle* and *Oracle*, January 17, 1798.

¹⁶ *Morning chronicle*, February 16, 1776.

enjoying a work of art invented for his amusement and instruction by a poet, and acted by another artist of corresponding talent called a player. All beyond this is the dream of ignorance and inexperience.¹⁹

Boaden's ideas did not seriously divert any designer of stage scenery from his effort to secure the illusion of reality, at least during the first half of the nineteenth century.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, color and lighting were more seriously studied, particularly the effects of lighting. Noverre was persuaded that in the perfect stage picture the colors of dresses and scenery should be properly adapted to each other, so that neither would destroy the effect of the other.²⁰ His ideas on the distribution of light have already been cited. De Louthembourg's interest in lighting is quite as evident as his interest in perspective.²¹ While some of his innovations were mere spectacular tricks, it is apparent from the review of his production of *The runaway* that he was as much concerned with the whole problem of the distribution and control of light as was Noverre. Throughout the last two decades of the century there was a steady effort to secure a more natural lighting behind the proscenium. A text on theatrical architecture, published in Paris in 1801, contained a chapter entitled "De la manière d'éclairer la salle, sans nuire trop aux effets de la scène et du théâtre." Among the pertinent comments is the following paragraph:

La distribution des lumières entre les châssis de décorations, les plafonds et les toiles,

¹⁹ *The memoirs of Mrs. Siddons* (2d ed.; London, 1831), II, 292-93. Boaden's comments, though not published until 1827, were given in discussing the staging problems of Drury Lane's company when it moved to the Opera House in 1791.

²⁰ I, 90-92.

²¹ In my dissertation I have discussed at some length De Louthembourg's interest in stage lighting. His innovations have been commented upon by all historians of the eighteenth-century theater.

a constamment pour règle les intentions du décorateur, qui a en lui-même pour principe de poser ses masses comme l'a indiqué le sujet de l'ouvrage. Ainsi donc le théâtre doit s'éclairer avec intelligence, et conformément aux décorations qui y paraissent.²²

This is simply a restatement of Noverre's theory and De Louthembourg's practice. Without inquiring into the methods of operating the lights of the stage, we can be sure that there was a constant increase in the volume of light placed at the disposal of the machinists, that the machinists learned better how to mass lights at different areas of the stage while keeping other areas in shadow, and that they made some progress in mastering the control of both the color and the volume of light during a scene.²³ It is reasonable to suppose that the demands of the grander types of spectacles, which were full of dungeons, illuminated pavilions, picturesque moonlight scenes, etc., had been chiefly responsible for encouraging such experimentation.

The importance of proper lighting was recognized by the journalists throughout the whole of the last quarter of the century. They were quick to recognize invention and quick to challenge improprieties leading to unrealistic effects. The *Morning chronicle* was especially alive to irregularities. On January 5, 1782, the

²² C. Boulet, *Essai sur l'art de construire les théâtres, leurs machines et leurs mouvements* (Paris, 1801), p. 94.

²³ An increase in the price of admission at Covent Garden in 1792 was defended by a correspondent in the *Morning chronicle* on the grounds of increase in production costs. The writer asserted that lights alone, in oils and candles, had increased in cost since 1762 from £700 to £1400 per year because of their increased number as well as the increased cost of the sperm. In Gainsborough's letter to Garrick, referred to above, there is a reference to Garrick's increase in lighting. Reviews of De Louthembourg's productions frequently make reference to his abundant use of light. See also the text of Burgoyne's *Maid of the oaks* (London, 1777), p. 12, in which the characters comment on the great number of lamps needed for the fete and also upon the uses of the lamps in particular scenes.

critic of that paper praised the managers for increasing the volume of light the preceding evening, since it "is a circumstance of so much consequence on a stage where De Louthembourg's talents are exerted." Failure to conform to the demands of the text of *Romeo and Juliet* in lighting the tomb scene and the procession at Covent Garden in 1781 was severely criticized. By leaving the stage and side lights on during that scene, the critic said, "the torches . . . seemed superfluous; when Paris withdrew; desiring 'Night to muffle him awhile,' he appeared perfectly wise in walking off in search of darkness, for the audience saw nothing but a semblance of broad daylight about the tomb."²⁴ These and similar criticisms indicate how much the audiences had come to expect in the way of naturalness and propriety in the use of stage lighting.

The striving toward a realistic setting was served by other factors than the technical progress in perspective painting and in lighting. One of these was the interest in pictorial and descriptive information about particular places. The immense volume of travel literature—scientific, pseudo-scientific, and aesthetic—reflects an interest in the particularities of nature, as opposed to its ideal or universal qualities. This aspect of taste is both romantic and realistic. It is romantic in its inclination toward the remote and singular; it is realistic in its inclination toward some degree of topographical and architectural verisimilitude. Explorers like Cook were accompanied in their travels by artists and draftsmen, who brought back paintings and sketches of the landscapes, buildings, costumes, and crafts of peoples in remote places of the earth. These artistic efforts had a very considerable effect upon spectacles, notably in such productions as *Omai* (Covent Garden, 1785), for

which De Louthembourg devised scenes from John Webber's paintings made on Cook's third voyage, and in *Ramah Droog* (Covent Garden, 1798), for which Richards and his staff at Covent Garden made scenes from Thomas Daniell's drawings of Indian landscape and architecture. For *The choice of Harlequin* (Covent Garden, 1782) Richards painted scenes of an Asiatic background from drawings by Tilly Kettle. Nearly all works of the more aesthetic type of travel literature—the "tours" of picturesque landscapes in England and on the Continent—were written by men who had some interest in drawing and who preserved a pictorial record of their travels. The taste for this type of pictorial art was reflected on the stage in the countless scenes of particular spots noted for their picturesque beauty. A pantomime, *The wonders of Derbyshire*, was perhaps the most elaborate spectacle of the kind.²⁵

Coincident with the taste for historical romances and medieval horror tales, a taste for settings which laid some claims to architectural and historical accuracy developed. One of the scene-painters who gave considerable impetus to the taste for architecturally correct scenes was Michael Angelo Rooker, chief designer

²⁵ *The wonders of Derbyshire* (Drury Lane, 1779) was one of De Louthembourg's greatest successes. The theater paid the artist's expenses to Derbyshire to enable him to make sketches for the scenes in this pantomime. De Louthembourg's model for one of its scenes is in the possession of Frank Arlton, Esq., of London. A photograph of it is reproduced in my dissertation. Other productions which contained scenes of places noted for their picturesque or their sublime character were *Hartford bridge* by William Pearce; *The travellers in Switzerland* by Henry Bate Dudley; a pantomime, *Mother Shipton*, which contained some scenes of notable spots in Yorkshire; and another pantomime, *The Giant Causeway*, whose Irish scenes are suggested by the title. For a short time the pantomimes were little more than travelogues or "tours." *Harlequin traveller* was built around scenes of Paris; *Harlequin touchstone* exhibited scenes of Rome; and, while *Harlequin everywhere* did not altogether live up to its title, it was one of the few productions to exhibit scenes of North America.

²⁴ *Morning chronicle*, September 25, 1781.

for the Haymarket from about 1778 until the last years of the century. Little notice has been given to Rooker's work, but it is evident from reviews that the architectural character and the general correctness of his scenes were a chief source of appeal. Aside from his work as a scene-painter, he was well known as a painter of architectural ruins. The *Diary* stated in 1790 that it knew "not an artist who possesses a pencil more skillful and correct" than Rooker's.²⁶ For the scenes of Colman's play, *The mountaineers*, the *Thespian magazine* had the warmest praise, declaring that "Mr. Rooker has established his reputation long ago for the beauty of his scenery, or his last efforts alone would have won the laurel. The distinctions of situation, time, costume, and architecture, so rarely attended to by the painters at the winter theatres, are here observed with critical exactness."²⁷

It was William Capon, however, who brought the taste for antiquarian research most forcibly to the attention of theater audiences. Supported by Kemble, he produced for more than two decades in the London theaters scenes chiefly of notable buildings in and about London. Among the more remarkable productions for which he executed scenes before the end of the century were *Macbeth* (1794), *The Cherokee* (1794), *The iron chest* (1796), *Vortigern* (1796), *The plain dealer* (1796), and *De Montfort* (1800).²⁸ Boaden's account of the

scenery for *De Montfort* shows the scale upon which Capon worked.

Every care was taken in the decoration of *De Montfort*. Capon painted a very unusual pile of scenery, representing a church of the 14th century with its nave, choir, and side aisles, magnificently decorated; consisting of seven planes in succession. In width this extraordinary elevation was about 56 feet, 52 in depth, and 37 feet in height. It was positively a building.²⁹

Despite Capon's successes, many of the productions pretending to some degree of historical accuracy in the details of their settings failed to receive the approbation of those who claimed an interest in antiquarianism. Between the years 1799 and 1802 the *Gentleman's magazine* published at irregular intervals a series of "Critiques" entitled "Of the impropriety of theatrical representations as far as they relate to the scenery, dresses, and decorations, when brought forward as illustrations of the antient history of this country." They were signed by "An artist and an antiquary." The first two of the Critiques were analyses of the staging of two spectacles, *Feudal times* and *The castle spectre*. The author began the first article with a general criticism of scenic improprieties:

Of the many deceptions passed upon the publick, those of the Theatre, when they attempt any performance of old English customs: and manners, are none of the least; and I am free to declare, that I never witnessed a piece got up with any tolerable degree of attention either to our antient buildings, dresses, or decorations. A strange jumble of ideas, brought together by the various artists, mechanics, and tradesmen, of the Theatres, caught by transitory glimpses at a few of our antient buildings and pictures, and mixed with

²⁶ July 17, 1790.

²⁷ September, 1793, p. 214.

²⁸ William Capon served an apprenticeship in scene-painting at the Royalty and at the Royal Circus before Kemble brought him to Drury Lane. For the most extensive accounts of his work see Boaden's *Memoirs of the life of John Philip Kemble* (London, 1825); and W. J. Lawrence, "The pioneers of modern English stage mounting: William Capon," *Magazine of art*, XVIII (June, 1895), 289-92. Lawrence states that Capon was scenic director of Drury Lane after 1794. This is doubtful, I think. The majority of the productions were designed by Thomas Greenwood and his son, if the evidence of the playbills is correct.

Some of Capon's most spectacular work was produced after 1809, when Kemble opened the new Covent Garden.

²⁹ *Life of Kemble*, II, 257.

their presuming notions of improving on what antient objects they have thus so superficially noticed, are held up to the publick as faithful copies of our antient *costume*.³⁰

After asserting that he had for a long time attempted to bring this fault to the attention of the managers of the theaters, he proceeded to an account of the recent production of *Feudal times*. Act I, scene 1, represented a castle situated in a lake, as seen from an adjoining village. Of this scene he wrote:

The architecture of the castle was too undetermined to mark any of our antient styles; and I perceived, in the base part of the walls and towers, arches for admittance of boats and barges in and out of the castle. In all the remains of castles in the various parts of the kingdom I never witnessed this *convenience*; and I have hitherto understood, both from antient MSS and from our castles, either ruinous or perfect, that the only way to pass in or out of such buildings, was over the bridges, and through the first gate of entrance belonging to them.

Of the makes of the barges and boats we must refer to those seen on the Thames at this day.³¹

Each scene is examined in careful detail. Concerning the final scene, in which an exploding mine had attracted the fulsome praises of the press generally, he protested against the use of gunpowder for the explosion of the mine, since its use was unknown in England before the fourteenth century.

In his fourth Critique, the "Antiquarian" turned his attention to the productions of Shakespeare. Why, he asked, do we see Shakespeare's plays produced "without the smallest attention either to our antient *costume*, or a decent expenditure to render them respectable to audiences familiarized to a continual display

of rich and magnificent spectacles, under the titles of serious operas, ballet dances, and pantomimes?"³² He declared that their "getting-up" brings them "near the brink of contempt and ridicule." He then turns to an examination of a production of *Richard the Third* at Drury Lane given during the current season. Since Kemble was giving more attention at this time to historical details in the production of Shakespeare than had any of his predecessors, the comments are all the more interesting. The writer calls the costumes a jumble made up from fancy and from portraits of Charles I's days. He describes a scene depicting the Tower as "one of the most unaccountable apologies for the architecture of the fifteenth century that can possibly be conceived; a huddle of compartments, cornices, arches, pilasters, &c. of every style that the painter had ever seen."³³ Act III, scene 1, represents "the Palace" which, the writer says, surely ought to mean Westminster, but no view of any part of Westminster was forthcoming. "It is true, the artist, by selecting exact copies of our antient architecture, and exhibiting them here, has shewn his good sense and true taste; but why was he not directed by the managers to take his scene from Westminster-Hall, he being, from this proof of skill, so well enabled to perfect such an undertaking?"³⁴ The writer then makes a charge startlingly similar to that of Noverre's criticism forty years earlier. Managers, actors, and artists, he says, never "take counsel together," so as to give the whole performance its due appropriate effect . . . the artist is told to paint such and such a scene without ever being told for what purpose it is

³⁰ *Ibid.*, LXX, Part I (April, 1800), 318.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 520. The artist referred to was undoubtedly Capon.

³³ *Gentleman's magazine*, LXIX, Part I (February, 1799), 113.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

intended."³⁵ Altogether, the articles comprise one of the most interesting commentaries which have been preserved on the *mise en scène* of the English theater in the late eighteenth century.

More pervasive than the taste for the singular and the particular in nature and the taste for historical and geographical verisimilitude was the taste for the picturesque. From the beginning of this period to its end, no term appears in the vocabulary of theatrical critics more frequently than the word "picturesque." It was used with the same freedom and ambiguity in theatrical criticism as in the general literature of the times. Almost every sort of landscape was described as picturesque, and certainly none of the professional dramatic critics appears to have employed the term in so precise a sense as that in which Gilpin had defined it.³⁶ Any stage setting which reminded the critic of the landscapes of Claude Lorrain, Poussin, Rosa, or Gaspar in any respect was "picturesque." There was little distinction of any kind drawn between the sublime and the picturesque. In short, so far as theatrical criticism went, the term was a categorical name for almost any romantic exterior setting.

Despite the broad use of the term in theatrical criticism, there can be no doubt that, even in its narrowest and technically most correct sense, it applied properly to many of the exterior settings

³⁵ *Ibid.* The conclusion of this essay deals chiefly with costume. The writer makes a direct plea to Kemble to improve the scenic department of the theater.

³⁶ William Gilpin, *Three essays: on picturesque beauty; on picturesque travel; and on sketching landscape* (London, 1792). The essays were written many years before their publication. Gilpin carefully defines the kind of beauty appropriate to the picturesque style and is at pains to make clear that while roughness as opposed to smoothness is appropriate to the picturesque, the singular and fantastic aspects of nature are by no means favorite objects of the picturesque landscape painted (see Essay II, in Gilpin's *Works* [3d ed.; London, 1808], I, 43).

of the period. Since the principal scene-designers of the last quarter of the century were men who enjoyed considerable reputation as artists of the picturesque school outside the theater, it was inevitable that they should carry that tradition to the playhouse.³⁷ Although the stage was well adapted to highly formalized, symmetrical garden scenes, it was equally well adapted to picturesque landscape. The proscenium formed a natural frame, and the wings were the inevitable side screens of irregular rocks, trees, cottages, etc., conventionally employed in all picturesque art. Ground-rows and cut-cloths assisted in building up the foreground and middle distance, while the back scene was a fine perspective view of mountains, lake, or seacoast. Once the artists had mastered the trick of breaking up the scene to give the illusion of great depth, the opportunities of painting effective sets in the picturesque style were greatly enhanced. With a fair degree of realism in the painting and lighting, nature could scarcely be seen in the theater except as "picture-like."

The texts of the plays are not always helpful in describing their landscape settings. Some of the authors, however, give the reader a detailed account of the kind of scene they envision. Mrs. Brooke's comic opera, *Rosina* (Covent Garden, 1782), opens with a scene which

discovers a rural prospect: on the left side a little hill with trees at the top; a spring of water rushes from the side, and falls into a

³⁷ See Elizabeth Manwaring, *Italian landscape in 18th century England* (New York, 1925), pp. 73, 108. Miss Manwaring's discussion of the cult of the picturesque and C. W. Hussey's work, *The picturesque* (London, 1927), make brief references to the reflection of the taste for the picturesque in stage scenery. Hussey says that De Louthembourg is "perhaps the greatest painter who can be set down as picturesque" (p. 259). Miss Manwaring properly describes De Louthembourg as a follower in the manner of Salvator Rosa. His paintings and drawings show a taste for the wild and rugged aspects of nature.

natural bason below: on the right side a cottage at the door of which is a bench of stone. At a distance a chain of mountains. The manor-house in view. A field of corn fills up the scene.³⁸

Sheridan's *Pizarro* also contained several landscapes of the picturesque and more ruggedly sublime variety. Other authors describe scenes in less detail but in terms that leave little doubt about the picturesque effect. Charles Dibdin's comic opera, *The Quaker* (Drury Lane, 1777), contained a scene which was "an irregular hill carried quite to the back of the stage, so situated that Lubin, who comes from it during the symphony of the duet, is sometimes seen and sometimes concealed by the trees. A cottage on one side near the front."³⁹ Colman's *The mountaineers* contained many mountainous landscapes, one of which is described as "part of the Sierra de Ronda. In one part of the scene, a cave overgrown with bushes: in another, a rude bank with stumps of trees. (Daybreak.)"⁴⁰ Scenes such as these could be enumerated by the score. Nearly every pantomime contained two or three such landscapes, even when the entertainment was not expressly built around such pictorial display.

The reviews give further evidence of the wide use of picturesque settings as well as proof of their popularity. When *The Christmas tale* was brought out at Drury Lane in 1776 as an afterpiece, the *Morning chronicle* stated that "those who delight in a representation teeming with instances of the sublime, the beautiful, and the surprising, in scenery and machinery, will be highly entertained."⁴¹ The same paper said of *The battle of Hastings* (Drury Lane, 1778) that "nothing

could be more picturesque than the opening scene, representing the gate of an old castle on the one side, a wood on the other, and the moon in perspective through the trees."⁴² Of O'Keeffe's opera, *The castle of Andalusia* (Covent Garden, 1782), a lavishly staged operatic spectacle that bordered on the melodramatic, the *Morning post* reported that the opening scene had "a bold and picturesque effect, worthy even of Mortimer's pencil."⁴³

Picturesque scenes continued to be in favor into the next century. From England the taste spread to France.⁴⁴ In London the stage settings of Clarkson Stanfield and David Roberts, in particular, continued the style into the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Despite imperfections which resulted from a limited mastery of the techniques of stage design and an often imperfect knowledge of the content which was being represented in the stage picture, the aim of the scenic artists of the last quarter of the eighteenth century is clear. Their technical objective was to secure an illusion of nature. The subject matter of the stage settings was a representation of the picturesque and sublime in nature and of scenes remote in space and time.

It is interesting that these objectives achieved their finest expression in a me-

³⁸ January 26, 1778.

³⁹ November 12, 1782. John Hamilton Mortimer, A.R.A., like De Loutherboug, was inclined toward the style of Rosa. He was immensely admired for his gloomy scenes of caverns and rugged scenery.

⁴⁰ See Marie-Antoinette Allévy, *La Mise en scène en France dans la première moitié du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris, 1938). In discussing the growth of spectacles, scenic novelties, and the demand for a multiplicity of scenes within a single spectacle on the nineteenth-century French stage, the author attributes the origins to the English: "C'est le triomphe du mouvement, de la nature et du 'pittoresque.' Un terme qui va faire fortune au théâtre et auquel s'accouple déjà le mot 'romantique' dont les Anglais faisaient depuis longtemps usage pour exprimer le caractère des sites sauvages, mystérieux, terrifiants, plongeant l'imagination de spectateur dans la mélancolie ou dans l'horreur" (p. 23).

³⁸ (12th ed.; London, 1788), p. 7.

³⁹ (London, 1777), p. 1.

⁴⁰ (2d ed.; London, 1795), p. 47.

⁴¹ October 19, 1776.

chanical exhibition, the Eidophusikon, invented and exhibited by De Loutherboung about the time that he left the employment of Drury Lane.⁴⁵ The stages of

⁴⁵ The Eidophusikon was first exhibited in 1781. It became a sensation immediately and was exhibited for several seasons. The fame of its inventor and the merit of the invention brought it an attention far exceeding the ordinary mechanical novelties exhibited in the city. The titles of a few of the scenes exhibited suggest their romantic character: "Sunset, a view over Naples"; "Moonlight, a view of the Mediterranean, the rising of the moon contrasted with the effect of fire"; "Niagara Falls." To exquisite details in the construction of parts of the setting and to care in management of color and light, De Loutherboung managed to add sound effects which led one commentator to speak of his developing the "picturesque of sound." For detailed accounts of the exhibition see the *Morning herald*, February 26 and March 1, 1781, and the *European magazine*, March, 1782, pp. 181-82.

the public theaters were not yet equipped to produce on a grand scale the remarkable effects which De Loutherboung achieved on his small stage, but there can be no doubt that the scene-designers were striving to attain the same end.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ The *London chronicle* (August 30-September 1, 1785) recognized the influence of the Eidophusikon in a review of a pantomime at the Haymarket, *Here, there and everywhere*: "The scenery is executed with great art particularly in imitation of the moving pictures of the Eidophusikon. From a clear sunshine the scene is gradually obscured with a thick fog . . . and this gradually disperses again." The *Morning chronicle* calls the fog a new phenomenon in stage machinery, but De Loutherboung had manipulated it on his stage by the use of gauze curtains and lights.

